

THE STARRY FLAG
 THRILLING STORIES OF OUR VICTORIOUS ARMY
 STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS.

HAL ON THE OUTPOST

OR WITH THE ARMY ABOVE DOOMED SANTIAGO.



BY
**DOUGLAS
 WELLS.**

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STARRY FLAG.

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Hal on the Outpost

OR,

With the Army Above Doomed Santiago.

By DOUGLAS WELLS.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

"Juan! What in the world is the meaning of this?"

The speaker was Lieutenant Hal Maynard, of General Lawton's command. He was bending over a fresh trail which had happened to catch his eye.

The person to whom he was calling, his friend, Captain Juan Ramirez, of the Cuban army, came running up to join him. He bent down to examine the earth, and a moment later gave an exclamation indicative of surprise quite as great as his friend's.

The two officers were engaged upon scout duty in front of the American forces in front of Santiago. Lawton's brigade had set out early that morning to advance a little farther upon their task of encircling the besieged city.

Just in front of the little scouting party,

which consisted of about a dozen men, was a larger body of Spaniards who were making a feeble resistance to the advance. They were still firing, though retreating slowly, and consequently the two officers were in a rather exposed position at that moment.

But they were so absorbed in the discovery which Hal had just made that they seemed not to notice that.

There was a narrow trail, or footpath, apparently leading from the city of Santiago. A rain during the night had made it soft and muddy, and what tracks there were in it could be plainly seen.

There were a number of footsteps visible, and it was evident that a considerable body of men had passed there quite recently.

But what had caused the surprise of the two was one of the footsteps. It was smaller, in fact almost ridiculously small in comparison with the others.

No. 26 of True Blue is entitled "Wolves of the Navy; or, Clif Faraday's Search for a Traitor."

"It's a woman's," Juan cried.

"It is, indeed," his friend answered, "and what is more, you can see by the heel that she wore some kind of an evening slipper."

"And she's lost one of them!" the Cuban added, eagerly. "See, here is the print of a stocking foot!"

That was a decidedly strange discovery under such circumstances, and it was not to be wondered that the two young men had their curiosity aroused.

In fact they almost forgot their command and the dangers of their situation. But half a minute later they were reminded of that in a very startling way. A bullet whistled through Hal Maynard's cap.

He looked about him then with a laughing exclamation, and the two sprang back into the shelter of a thicket. But Hal's interest in his discovery was not in the least abated by that interruption.

"I'm going to try to find out what that means," he muttered.

"You'd better wait till those Spanish sharpshooters take another run," laughed his friend. "Otherwise you'll come to grief before you get very far."

Hal called out to his men to halt there and wait for the main body to draw near. After a few minutes more of skirmishing with the Spaniards the firing ceased and Hal ventured out upon the trail once more.

This time he was not molested, though it was doubtful if he would have stopped even had he been fired on. Juan Ramirez was disposed to rally him upon his inter-

est in the owner of those small slippers; but it was plain to be seen that Juan was quite as much interested as his friend.

The two had not the least difficulty in pursuing their investigations, for the woman, whoever she was, had kept steadily to the path.

"She must have passed here this morning, since the rain," said Hal. "What in the world do you suppose can be the matter?"

"Probably some refugee," suggested Juan.

"But why does she wear a high-heeled slipper?" demanded the other. "And why does she leave one behind her?"

"I'm sure I don't know," the Cuban responded, with a smile. "I'm not as familiar with the habits of the sex as you. Perhaps if we keep following the trail the wrong way we may have a chance to ask her."

Hal was about to make some response to those bantering observations. But just then they happened upon a discovery which drove the intention out of his mind.

His questions were answered in a most unexpected way.

From Juan's remark it may be inferred that the two had been following the trail toward the city, and so in a direction opposite to that taken by the owner of the mysterious slipper.

And suddenly when they had reached a point about a hundred yards distant they happened upon a startling object.

"The other slipper!" they cried in one breath.

They sprang forward toward the ob-

ject. Sure enough, they found that it was what they sought.

"And it's an evening slipper, just as I said!" cried Hal. "It's stuck in the mud."

But that was by far the least important part of the discovery the two were destined to make, as they found an instant later.

"Look at the tracks about here!" cried Juan. "See, the ground is all torn up."

"And by her footsteps and those of some men," added the other, excitedly. "It's plain what that means."

It meant that there had been a struggle; the theory was verified more and more by every moment's investigation. Of course it put an end to the "refugee" idea; it set a fine mystery before the two officers.

They found that the footsteps continued onward. And so it was plain that some men had been dragging the woman against her will out of the city.

"But why in the world should Spaniards be doing that?" cried Hal, in great surprise. "Why?"

"Spaniards didn't do it," muttered Juan; "at least that won't be my guess."

"Then who could have?" Hal demanded. "You don't think——"

He hesitated, for he did not like to say what was in his mind for fear of wounding his friend. But Juan had no such scruples.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "I do think just that. It's some rascals belonging to the Cuban army."

As it subsequently proved, the two were mistaken in their hasty supposition.

But the theory served them for the present, and led them to a quick decision.

It was that that mystery ought to be looked into without an instant's delay.

"It hasn't been two hours since the rain," said Juan, "and that party could be overtaken in short order."

Hal would have undertaken the duty then and there, for it just suited his gallant and adventurous nature. But unfortunately he had orders to obey.

And so he merely put the slipper in his pocket and accompanied his friend back to the halting place of the men.

They said nothing to any one about their discovery; they waited impatiently for about half an hour, when they were apprised by a tramping sound behind them that the advance guard of Lawton's division was arriving.

Hal immediately arose and prepared to go to the rear and report. He and Juan had said nothing, but the latter understood what his friend was going to do.

And so he was not in the least surprised when the young lieutenant, upon returning, remarked:

"I fixed it."

"We're going, then?" inquired the Cuban.

"Yes," answered Hal, "I managed to get twenty-four hours' leave of absence. Let's be quick!"

And so it happened that the two friends, mounted upon horseback, left the temporary camp five minutes later and rode swiftly down the narrow trail to the rescue of the owner of that lost slipper.

There Was Something Unusual Found in Locket by the Cadets.

CHAPTER II.

TRAPPED BY THE ENEMY.

The two officers were destined to meet with some rather startling adventures during the next few hours. But as they set out upon their journey they felt equal to anything that might come.

And they set their horses at a brisk gallop. For they knew that those they sought could not be a good way distant.

They had not the least difficulty in following the trail, for the footprints of the party could be plainly seen. By a rough calculation Hal made out that it consisted of about a dozen men.

For perhaps five miles the two rode on without incident of any kind. Then the trail was interrupted in an unexpected way.

The party had evidently had horses hidden in the thicket. The place could be seen where the animals had been tied. And where the men had mounted and ridden on down the path.

The footprints of the slipper could then of course be seen no longer; but it was easy to follow the horses, and so the two delayed not a moment.

"We must travel all the faster now," muttered Hal.

After that there was another long gallop, lasting over an hour; it carried the two to the end of the path. The party in front had turned off to the right and gone through the dense thicket.

After that the pursuers were compelled to go more slowly; they could not gallop at full speed, and they soon had cause to be glad of it.

For they had more chance to gaze

about them and at the trail they were following. And it was not long before the Cuban's sharp eyes noticed an important fact.

He chanced to glance at a footprint of one of the horses, deep in some soft mud. He stopped and pointed with a startled exclamation.

Hal understood at once.

"They can't be a hundred yards in front!" he cried.

There was a little pool of water close to the footprint, and water was slowly trickling into the latter. It was then not half filled.

And so it was plain that a horse had trod there a very few minutes before.

Juan Ramirez wasted no time in hesitating over that important discovery. He slid down from his horse and after signaling to Hal to remain there in silence, he darted on ahead.

Hal let him go alone, not because he was not anxious to share in the danger, but because he knew that the young Cuban was twice as good a woodsman as he, and could steal through the thicket as silently as an Indian.

And so the lieutenant merely drew his horse to one side and got his revolver ready in case of danger.

He did not think that he would be kept waiting long. And in this he was not mistaken.

Scarcely five minutes passed before Juan came running back.

Hal could see that his eyes were dancing with excitement.

"What is it?" Hal cried.

"I saw them," panted Juan.

Clif Complies With a Dying Man's Request, Though Dangerous.

"You did!"

"Yes. And, thank Heavens, we were wrong after all."

"Wrong?"

"Yes. I mean they're not Cubans."

"What! Who are they?"

"Spaniards!"

Hal gave an exclamation of incredulity.

"But it's true," insisted Juan. "They're guerillas! I'm sure of it."

"And how about the girl?"

"She's there," was the breathless answer. "She's a young girl—a beauty, too——"

"But what in the world are those men——"

"They must have kidnaped her. I counted fourteen of them, and as tough-looking scoundrels as you could wish for. They're still riding on fast, so they must be taking her to some sort of a hiding-place."

That was indeed interesting news which Juan had brought. The two found it of sufficient importance to justify them in dismounting and holding a council of war.

"We must make up our minds quickly," said Hal. "It was unwise of us to undertake this alone, I fear. But now shall we ride back for help or shall we——"

"If we delay that long they will escape us," was the impetuous Cuban's prompt rejoinder. "It's our duty to follow them at once!"

What their duty was rather was uncertain. But there was no doubt in the world as to what their pleasure was. And the

latter consideration carried the day. Juan's suggestion was adopted.

"We'll try it," said Hal, "though Heaven only knows what we two can do when we do catch up with them."

"Heaven knows, and Heaven will no doubt let us know," was Juan's abrupt response.

Without another word the two tethered their horses in a dense spot of the thicket. And then they set out on a dead run on the trail of the party.

Hal let his friend take the lead, for Juan would know exactly how far ahead to look for the men they were following.

It was not very long before he slowed down into a dog trot and then into a walk. He began stealing along with the utmost caution, stopping at every turn and peering cautiously ahead.

It was not long before he got some sign of the Spaniards. He suddenly held up his hand for silence, and Hal, listening intently, could hear the tramping of horses.

Once more the stealthy advance began. The two could not fail to realize that it was a perilous task they were undertaking, and their hearts thumped wildly as they crept on.

It was well for them that they went in silence. As it was they were within an ace of being discovered, and only the density of the thicket saved them.

For the party had stopped; and their two pursuers, hearing nothing, came on until they were almost upon them.

Juan's quick ear suddenly caught the sound of a voice. He dropped instantly into the underbrush. The two by creep-

ing on in silence for a few yards more could plainly see the whole party.

They were standing in a group conversing in whispers. Two of them were near by mounting guard over their unfortunate captive.

Hal found that Juan's description of the whole party was very accurate. The Spanish guerillas, for such they appeared to be, were most villainous-looking customers. And the girl would have been noticed among a thousand for her beauty.

It shone all the more in the strange situation in which the two young officers found her. And her costume was an extraordinary one for such a place, a white evening dress that had evidently been handsome, though it was now torn and stained with mud.

Upon this interesting scene Hal and Juan had at least five minutes to gaze. They were not a hundred feet from the group of men, who apparently had no suspicions.

But the two were keenly alive to the danger none the less. And it was not without a sigh of relief that they saw the party make a move once more.

But when they moved they did not mount their horses again. Hal, who was watching like a cat, did not fail to note that important circumstance.

He nudged Juan.

"Their hiding-place is pretty near now," he whispered.

There was another circumstance the pair observed, though they did not attach much importance to it then. It was that six of the men, lagging a trifle behind

the others, disappeared in the thicket in a different direction.

Meanwhile the girl and the main body of her captors had taken their horses by the bridles and gone on. In a few seconds Hal and Juan were once more alone.

The situation of the two just then was such that they had to act instantly. They held a whispered consultation lasting about ten seconds, and the result of it was that once more Juan Ramirez glided out to follow the party to their hiding-place.

"I'll allow you five minutes," said Hal, calmly. "Then I'll set out to follow."

And so Juan disappeared. The lieutenant took out his watch and waited.

Every second seemed almost a minute, so anxious was he. And yet he had strength of will enough to restrain himself until the time limit had expired.

Juan did not return, and so his friend got up, and gripping his revolver, set out through the thicket. He did not feel worried about Juan, merely concluding that the guerillas had gone farther than they had thought.

"I won't spoil his plans by making any noise," thought Hal.

And it was well that he was cautious. His silence proved most fortunate for him.

Hal had not gone a hundred yards before he fairly stumbled upon a sight which almost took his breath away. It was so startling and so completely unexpected!

In a little clearing in the thicket lay Juan, flat upon his back, a Spanish officer

Bushes Cannot Fly, but Clif Saw Them Moving at Him.

standing over him and gazing down at him with a triumphant laugh.

For a moment Hal was paralyzed, for he thought that Juan was dead. But then he saw that the Cuban was merely bound hand and foot.

The Spaniard was one of the six guerillas they had seen separate from the rest. Hal comprehending the situation at once, knew that the man must have taken Juan by surprise and "held him up."

"I think it'll be a chance to turn the tables," chuckled Hal.

Fortunately the Spaniard had not heard the American's stealthy approach. He was in a fine situation to be taken by surprise, especially since he had left his revolver lying on the ground while he tied up his prisoner.

Hal hesitated not one second; he sprang out of the bushes and leveled his own weapon at the man's head.

"My prisoner, señor!" he laughed triumphantly. "Up with your hands!"

The officer whirled about in horror. He saw Hal running toward him.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," the young lieutenant chuckled. "But I'll have to free that prisoner again."

The officer, who was apparently of the rank of major, was so completely taken aback that his hands went up mechanically. He staggered backward with an exclamation.

Hal stepped up to him and took hold of his sword to remove it. But at that same instant came a startling development, one that complicated the situation not a little.

The possibility of there being other

Spaniards near had not once occurred to Hal. He had been compelled to act hastily and without calculating the chances.

Therefore he was completely taken aback. About fifty yards distant the bushes were parted and four Spaniards burst their way through.

Hal saw with dismay that he was gazing into the muzzles of four rifles. The major gave a shout of delight when he saw them.

"My prisoner!" cried he, overjoyed.

He thought that he was safe. But he did not know with what a desperate and daring fighter he had to deal.

His joy now faded. For Hal, quick as a panther in action, seized him about the neck with his arm and swung him around in front, using him as a shield against the other Spaniards.

At the same moment Hal aimed his revolver at the men.

"The first one of you moves is a dead man!" he roared. "Look out!"

That was indeed an extraordinary situation. It scarcely seemed possible to Hal himself. But his nerve and boldness had taken his enemies completely by surprise, and not one of them could think of a thing to do.

If there had been a nervy marksman among them he might, of course, have put a bullet through the American's head. But no one of them dared do anything for fear of hitting the unfortunate major, who wriggled and kicked in vain to endeavor to free himself.

But Hal, who was fortunately

A Terrible Tumble in a Hollow Log. Did It Mean Death?

the stronger of the two, gripped him like a vise and choked him into submission.

The lieutenant meanwhile never once took his eyes off of the four soldiers, who stood glaring at him like hungry bulldogs.

They whispered with each other, and one of them then started to draw back into the woods. Hal, who knew that that would ruin his chances, soon stopped that.

"Another step and I fire!" he yelled.

And he yelled it as if he meant it, too. The puzzled Spaniards halted irresolutely.

They evidently wanted a leader; but the major was even more frightened than they, and breathless besides, and so he could give no orders. For fully a whole minute that strange group remained perfectly motionless.

Hal was racking his brains trying to think how the affair might end. He could think of no way of escaping, and yet he could not keep this struggling man held under his arm forever.

There was one way out of the situation, a decidedly unpleasant one for poor Hal. Unfortunately he had no way of foreseeing it.

There had been six men in that party. Only five were visible. But the sixth soon made his whereabouts known.

He had crept through the bushes in the rear in order to try a shot. Hal was exposed to him there, but the man found that did him no good, for the modern bullet is capable of going through the bodies of several men, and there was as much chance of killing the major as be-

At any rate the major thought so,

for when he saw the man he yelled frantically:

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

And so the man did not shoot; he set about ending the matter in another way.

There was a tall branching oak tree not ten feet from where Hal and the major were struggling. It was an enormous tree, and the man crept up behind it unseen by any one. He climbed into a notch above the heads of the two.

And the first warning that Hal had of what the fellow hoped to do, was when he tried it successfully. To the American's unutterable consternation, he felt a slip noose dropped over his head and pulled tight!

CHAPTER III.

A DESPERATE STROK.

Hal glanced up, and he saw in one moment that all was lost. There was no chance of shooting at the wily Spaniard, as he was well out of sight behind the tree.

In fact he was hanging on to the rope at the other side. Hal was almost jerked off his feet.

It is needless to say that he was beaten by that clever dodge. It was no use for him to pull and struggle, for the noose tightened until he grew black in the face.

He raised his revolver and fired at the rope, hoping to sever it. But he was half blinded and dazed, and he missed it.

The Spaniards gave a wild cheer of delight. They rushed forward just as Hal's revolver dropped from his hand and just as the infuriated officer managed to tear himself loose.

If Vic Had Only Searched the Dead Body More Carefully!

Hal's game struggle was at an end.

What happened to him immediately after that happened as if in a dream. Hal did not lose consciousness, but his head was swimming and he was half dazed.

The irate Spaniards were most of them for going on with the hanging operation then and there. But fortunately for Hal, they were civilized enough to realize that that would be going too far.

Nor were they altogether without admiration for what was certainly a daring enough action. Hal could see that even the ruffled major was staring at him as if wondering if he were a man or a devil.

The terrible noose was loosened and Hal staggered back against the tree. His captors gathered about him.

They were laughing in as much glee and triumph as if they had captured a whole regiment. They set to work to tie Hal up with the very rope that had choked him into submission.

They fastened him securely, hand and foot. After that they tumbled him unceremoniously into the bushes beside Juan and turned to whisper to each other.

They were evidently consulting what to do! A minute later one of them put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill whistle.

"That'll fetch 'em down," he muttered. "I suppose they'll carry them up to the cave."

Naturally those words were not lost upon the two captives, who were anxiously listening to find out what the men meant to do with them.

They knew from the above that the

guerilla band had some sort of a hiding-place near. There was no doubt that it was there they had taken the girl.

Hal and Juan had been looking for that "cave," but they had no desire to visit the place in their present condition; and they were watching every move of their six enemies anxiously.

The whistle they had given was answered by another one some distance away. As soon as they heard it all but one of the men turned away. It was evident that the whole six had been sentries watching the approach to their place of concealment.

They now resumed their watch of the trail, for they had no means of telling whether or not Hal and Juan had companions.

The third man remained to guard the prisoners. He stood leaning against a tree near by, eying them curiously.

But inasmuch as they were tied and helpless, he saw little need to guard them. The man waited for a minute or two listening for the arrival of his comrades; then, as they did not come he stepped over to an open spot in the thicket where he apparently expected to catch sight of them.

The prisoners had had little hope of escaping from the unpleasant situation in which they found themselves. But a possibility flashed over them both at that moment.

The man's back was turned! It might be for only a few moments—but then it could do no harm to make an effort to get free.

Hal and Juan had escaped from such a

The Foes Were Three to One, But Not When the Fight Was Ended.

situation as this before, and they knew just what to do. Juan rolled over silently, and a moment later his teeth were at the rope that bound his friend's hands.

It took him but one second to bite it. Hal was free again!

It was a matter of life and death after that, and it was no wonder that the two were trembling. The man's back was still to them, but he might turn at any moment and discover what they were doing.

Hal had a penknife in his pocket. He groped for it and opened the blade; never in his life had that operation seemed to take him so long, though he worked with feverish haste.

His only salvation was that no possibility of there being any danger had occurred to the Spaniard. He stood peering through the woods shading his eyes with his hands.

What the men had done with the captured revolvers Hal did not know; but he still had his sword, and he was counting on using that.

He cut his feet loose with a single slash; then with the swiftness and stealth of a panther he glided to his feet.

He did not stop to free Juan. At a crisis like this one man could do as much as two. And a second's delay might ruin all.

For the man had his revolver in his hand. If he should chance to glance behind him and see what was going on, there was no doubt that he would open fire the same instant.

And so Hal's very heart seemed to stop beating as he took his first step. The

man was not over fifty feet away, but that distance seemed an eternity, for it had to be gotten over before Hal could do anything.

As he moved, however, he had his muscles ready for a spring, and he meant that the man should have to fight for it. He slipped his sword out of the scabbard as he crept on.

Juan lay on the ground meanwhile watching him with intense anxiety, and feeling as if his brain would burst if the suspense was kept up very long. Juan feared not for himself, but for his friend, whose peril was indeed great.

And yet no Indian could have stolen over the ground more stealthily than the lieutenant; there was not even the sound of a stirring leaf. And as he crept on he raised his sword for the stroke.

He covered half the space without the Spaniard's having the faintest suspicion. But then suddenly Hal came to an unfortunate barrier—a stretch of high grass between him and the man.

He knew that he could not creep through that without making a noise, and for a moment he hesitated. Then he started to walk on again; but just as he expected, the dry grass crackled. And like a flash the man wheeled about.

But Hal, who had been watchful as a cat, saw the move the instant it began. He leaped forward at the same instant, and was at the man's side a moment later.

The Spaniard with a cry of horror had swung up his revolver. But before he could pull the trigger Hal's sword descended with the force of a sledgehammer.

And the man sank to the ground without a sound, his head split almost in two by the terrific stroke. His revolver was exploded by the convulsive twitching of his hand, and the bullet passed within a foot of Hal's head.

But he had no time to think of his narrow escape. He knew that the shot would bring the other men to the spot on a run; and Hal lost not an instant.

He stopped beside the man just long enough to snatch his revolver out of his hand, and then he whirled about and sprang toward his friend.

Hal's knife lay on the ground where he had left it. He seized it and in a moment more had cut the Cuban's bonds.

Juan staggered to his feet. At the same instant there was a crashing sound in the bushes near them, and two of the guerillas burst into view.

Hal swung up his revolver and fired. One of the men pitched forward upon his face. The other, with an oath of rage, replied at the same moment.

He was not a hundred feet away, and to Hal it seemed as if the flash of the weapon was almost in his face. He felt nothing, but he heard Juan just behind him give a cry of pain.

The Spaniard did not have time to fire a second shot. Hal wounded him, and he turned and ran, shouting aloud as he did so. The American turned instantly toward his friend.

His heart almost stood still from anxiety as he looked, for he did not know what might have happened. But fortunately, Juan's wound was only in the arm.

And the brave fellow never thought of it. He heard the shout of the rest of the Spaniards a short distance away, and so he caught Hal by the arm and turned to run.

The two knew that they would have a hard chase of it, for the guerillas had horses, and would no doubt use them when they discovered what had happened to their companions.

And so they ran for their very lives, tearing their way through the dense jungle at a surprising rate of speed.

Their ears were on the alert, and soon caught sounds that told them the guerillas had arrived upon the scene of their escape; that made them hurry on, if possible, even faster than before.

It was a terrible experience after the first few minutes. No more difficult country to run through could have been found, and they were soon breathless and exhausted. Thorns and cacti tore their clothing, and they stumbled over prostrate logs and tangled vines.

But still they kept on. For the shouts behind them did not recede in the least.

On the contrary, they soon began to draw near; and the trampling of horses was added to them. The fugitives glanced over their shoulders apprehensively at every step.

For they knew that the moment one of the men caught sight of them, their last hope would be gone. They might stand and fight, but the end could be but in their death.

And so as the sounds of pursuit came nearer the two grew desperate. They

were so exhausted they could scarcely move.

And consequently when a few moments later they caught sight of a dense cane brake off to the left they were glad to take the chance of hiding. They turned and forced their way in toward the centre.

They were so tired that they could only sink down upon the ground and gasp for breath. The Spaniards might come, but the two could do no more.

The Spaniards were soon heard tearing through the thicket, beating up the bushes and yelling to each other. Hal and Juan crouched low in their hiding-place, their hearts leaping wildly with excitement.

But fortunately for them they were not discovered. It was perhaps five minutes before their danger was really over. But over it finally was, to the fugitives' great relief. The men went on without having discovered them.

They could not breathe freely even yet, until they had made their escape certain. When they knew by the sounds that their enemies were some distance away, they got up and crept silently off to one side for two or three hundred yards.

Then they hid once more, this time in security. Hal bound up his friend's arm, after which they lay waiting for an hour or two, until they felt that their pursuers must surely have given up.

CHAPTER IV.

HAL'S BOLD VENTURE.

One would have supposed that that perilous experience would have cured the two, at least for a time, of any desire to continue their efforts. But as a matter of fact their eagerness for excitement came back almost as quickly as their breath.

They had set out that morning for the

purpose of solving that mystery. When they were once more safe and free they were in exactly the same position as they had been before, and so there was no reason for their not going on.

Therefore when it came time to discuss the next move, neither even suggested turning back.

"The next thing, of course," whispered Hal, "is to find that cave, as the fellow called it."

"That's it," Juan assented. "And obvious enough, too. But I fancy the doing of it won't prove quite so easy."

"The Spaniards will certainly be on the watch now," said the other, "but I guess we can fool them. There's only one thing to do. I'll set out to begin a hunt and you wait here meanwhile."

However "obvious" the brave Cuban may have thought his friend's first remark, he certainly did not think that of the last one. He protested vehemently.

But Hal soon brought him to a realization of what was best. He was wounded, and he had no weapon. It was better for one to be captured than two.

And so it happened that when Hal set out a few minutes later to begin his investigation, Juan merely crawled into a denser spot in the cane and hid to wait for his return.

As for the American, he did not hesitate a moment. He had a general idea where the guerillas' hiding-place must be, and he had the deep grass and tangled undergrowth to hide him from his enemies.

As he stole on he had his revolver ready, and he was watchful as a cat. He soon found that he had plenty of need to be.

It is foreign to the main purpose of our story to describe his perilous venture. Suffice it to say that he retraced his steps to the very spot where he and Juan had

Clif Found That a Girl of Spirit Will Always Defend Her Lover.

been in such danger. He there caught sight of at least a dozen of the infuriated Spaniards, who were apparently discussing the day's events.

Hal smiled to himself as he thought of what they would have done had they known their worst enemy was so near. There is no use denying that his heart was thumping excitedly, for his situation was perilous in the extreme, and this kind of Indian scout work was new to him.

But nevertheless he set out to follow the tracks of their horses, not doubting that they would lead him to the "cave."

Hal's advance was necessarily slow, for he dared not walk boldly. A bullet from the woods about him he knew might end his career at any moment.

The country in which he found himself was extremely mountainous and covered with what might very appropriately be called a jungle. Hal could scarcely see ten yards ahead of him.

He stole on so silently that it is doubtful if a serpent could have made less noise. It was that alone which accounts for what afterward seemed to him an almost miraculous accident.

To put the matter briefly, the cave to which the Spaniards had referred was in the side of a tall bushy cliff, and it was entered by a narrow pass between two canyon-like walls. The whole place was so covered with a dense growth of vegetation that there was only one way in which it could possibly have been found. That was the method which Hal had chanced to adopt, following the tracks of the guerillas' horses.

The cave, as Hal was destined soon to learn, was the hiding-place of at least a score of the Spanish troopers. It was of course guarded most carefully; at that very moment there were three men pacing

back and forth across the narrow, canyon-like entrance.

The extraordinary accident which happened to Hal was just this: So dense was the thicket and so silent was his progress that he passed those men without being heard or seen or even suspected. In fact, he passed them without even having the least idea of it himself.

And the first inkling he got of where he was was when he pushed his head through a tangled mass of grapevine and found himself confronting a steep cliff-side with a great black hole in it—the doorway of the guerillas' cave!

And standing in the entrance gazing out was a great black-bearded Spaniard, a rifle in his hand and a revolver in his belt.

Hal had, as we have said, half pushed his way out into the clearing. It was too late for him to draw back.

The man saw him. Their eyes met, and the two stood staring at each other in consternation.

CHAPTER V.

SOLVING THE MYSTERY.

It would have been hard to say which of those two was the more completely taken aback. The Spaniard gazed at Hal as he might have gazed at a ghostly apparition.

However, there is no doubt as to which of the two was the quicker to recover his wits. Hal's position was too desperately perilous a one for him to waste a second.

He swung up his revolver; and also the Spaniard moved his rifle; but there was just a moment's difference, and that was all, that was necessary. Hal's revolver was at the man's head.

"A move and you are a dead man!" the lieutenant whispered, hoarsely.

And the amazed Spaniard, who had no doubt heard of his opponent's former des-

perate acts, had sense enough to make no resistance. Hal really meant to fire and run for it, if he had.

"Drop your rifle!"

The man acted as if he were in a dream—obeying mechanically and staring in amazement. He was held up on his own doorstep!

It was indeed a bold thing Hal was doing. But there was nothing else he could have done, and so there was no use in hesitation. Only the utmost daring and calmness might have hoped to carry the day.

How many more guerillas might be in that cave Hal did not know; but it was a chance he had to take. He stepped boldly out into the cleared space beside the man, and removed his revolver from his belt.

"Now march!" he hissed.

And he emphasized it by pressing a cold muzzle against the man's forehead. It brought prompt obedience. The two forced their way into the underbrush once more.

"Now I mean to tie you up," said Hal. "Lie down. If you move, I shall fire."

He had no rope, but he cut long strips of vine; in two minutes he had that fellow securely gagged and bound so that he was utterly helpless.

And then once more Hal rose to his feet.

After that desperate little piece of work he felt confidence enough to defy a universe full of Spaniards. He was in one of those daring moods in which a man is ready to attempt anything and succeed in all he attempts.

Perhaps it was foolhardy and certainly it was imprudent, but be that as it may, no sooner did Hal find himself peering through the vine at that hole in the rock again than he made up his mind to one desperate venture—he was going to enter that cave!

"No chance like this may ever come again," he muttered. "It's ten to one they're all outside looking for me."

And with that rather risky probability, Hal contented himself. He gripped his revolver, stepped out of the bushes and marched boldly into the cave.

His heart was beating like a sledgehammer. He saw only black darkness before him, and silence. But for all he knew he might be walking into the midst of a dozen Spaniards.

Literally speaking, he did almost walk into the midst of one. At the end of the narrow entrance was a broad apartment black as night. A man lay sleeping on the floor, and Hal stepped upon him as he glided swiftly in.

The man sat up, gazed about him and muttered an oath of rage. That he did not see Hal was due to no cleverness of the latter's.

For the American was utterly bewildered by that last accident. All he could think of to do was to rush on in the darkness; and so the man saw only a shadowy figure when he raised up.

Naturally he thought it was one of his friends. He swore some, and then, being half drunk anyway, he rolled over and went to sleep again.

And so the nervy young officer was left standing at the centre of the cavern unseen and unsuspected, quite breathless and aghast at the thought of his own daring. He stumbled over into the dark shadows at the side, and there waited.

It may readily be believed that as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness Hal darted glances of intense interest about him.

He wanted to know a number of important things—how many Spaniards were really in the place, and what sort of a place it was, and where he might hide in it—to say nothing of the whereabouts

of the beautiful young girl whom these ruffians had kidnaped.

Hal got answers to all his questions. What he saw (for he was soon able to see quite clearly) was as follows:

The cave was simply a bare hollow in the rocks, damp and uncomfortable enough. The horses were all inside, crowded together in a narrow passageway at the right. Of men there were only three, all sleeping near the door with the one Hal had stumbled over.

As to hiding places he could see none. The end of the cavern was blocked up with piles of boxes and kegs, stores of some sort. The rest of the place was absolutely bare.

There were the remains of a small fire smouldering in the centre of the apartment. By its light Hal saw one thing that made him glad he had not done much walking about. It was a round black hole in the ground, apparently a well, for it had a rude windlass and a bucket above it.

So much for the cave; there was one thing else to interest Hal, a figure which he saw lying stretched out on the ground in one corner—the girl! She was lying with her head buried in her arms, and Hal was startled to hear her moaning aloud.

Spanish guerillas and all other perils were completely forgotten by Hal in an instant; and without hesitation he stole swiftly over to the girl's side.

There was not a moment to be lost, he thought to himself. Hal had come to save this girl, and there could be no better time to escape than now.

But as if to mock that wild hope at that very instant one of the Spaniards began muttering to himself and then sat up and gazed about him.

He did not see anything suspicious, for Hal crouched low. But the fellow got

up and lurched to the entrance, where he stood gazing out.

That cut off the chance for the moment, and Hal gazed about him completely at a loss what to do.

His thoughts were called to the fair captive near him.

She had heard his step, and gazed up with a look of wild terror upon her face. But she must have recognized Hal's uniform, or else have seen something in his fine features different from the ruffianly Spaniards.

For she seemed to comprehend his errand completely. She grasped him by the arm convulsively.

"You have come to help me!" she gasped.

"Yes," whispered Hal. "Ssh! We may have a chance in a moment."

The girl sank back with a moan; and Hal continued watching with feverish impatience until the guerilla should lie down again or else go out.

But minute after minute of intense anxiety passed, and still the man did neither. The girl still retained her grip upon Hal's arm, and he could feel her hand shaking like a leaf.

It was a queer place to listen to a story in. But as time passed and still there was nothing to be done, the young lieutenant turned toward the unfortunate prisoner and asked her to tell him how she had come to be in this situation.

"Speak low," he whispered. "No one will hear us."

Rita Velasquez (as the girl gave her name) was almost too weak to speak. But she managed to convey to Hal in a few words the solution of the mystery he had been seeking.

She was a daughter of General Velasquez, one of the officers of Santiago. She had been forcibly abducted from her

father's house during the previous evening.

It appeared that the guerillas, who made this cave their headquarters, had recently captured a large quantity of valuable ammunition from the Cubans. They had refused a demand from the officers of the regular army to turn it over to the authorities at Santiago.

General Velasquez had thrown one of the rebellious men into prison. The leader of the band (the officer whom Hal had already met) had in revenge kidnapped the general's daughter from the city, presumably to hold her as a hostage.

Such was the frightened girl's story. Hal's wrath was great indeed when she told him that the ruffianly men had beaten her to compel her to follow them.

Hal Maynard was a hot-blooded youth, and he felt almost like getting up and beginning to fight with the guerillas then and there.

But he restrained that impulse, and contented himself by promising the girl upon his honor that he would die if necessary in order to save her.

"But I have something to save myself," she muttered, "if it comes to the worst."

As she said that there was a gleam in her dark eyes. She thrust her hand into a pocket of her skirt and took out a little vial.

"What is that?" Hal whispered.

"It is poison enough to kill fifty men," was the grim answer. "I do not mean to give it to them, but to take it myself if necessary."

She showed more resolution when she said that than Hal had supposed her capable of, for she seemed completely unnerved by the humble experience she had been through.

But she was evidently in earnest as she spoke of the poison. Hal understood

what she meant, and could not disapprove of the resolution. But nevertheless he had other plans, and so he held out his hand for the bottle.

"Let me take care of that," he whispered.

The girl stared at him in surprise.

"I do not mean that you shall commit suicide," Hal continued. "I have promised to help you. And so you must not keep that."

The girl yielded to his stronger will and purpose, though not half knowing why. Nor in fact had he himself any clear idea in mind except to keep the poison, whatever it was, away from the frightened girl. He was glad afterward he had done so.

The conversation narrated above all took place in the course of perhaps two minutes. It was of course carried on in the faintest whispers—and did not excite any suspicions in the man who was standing in the doorway.

That person showed no intention of moving again, and Hal grew impatient as he realized it. He thought of trying to hold him up as he had done the other.

But unfortunately Hal had no time to make the attempt. He was suddenly interrupted by a startling series of incidents. So startling were they in fact that the girl almost fainted from terror.

The man at the doorway shouted a greeting to some one. There came sounds of eager voices, and of footsteps.

And a moment later, as the uproar grew almost deafening, about a dozen men could be seen coming in at the entrance.

Hal was surprised in the guerillas' cave!

CHAPTER VI.

A DESPERATE SITUATION.

A more perilous position than Hal's it would have been hard to imagine. His mind was in a perfect whirl.

For a moment he thought of opening fire and driving them back. Then he recollected that he had only two or three shots left in his revolver.

And so he shot a swift glance about him in search of a hiding-place. Never did a hope seem more desperate, for the cave had not a nook or a cranny.

And so there was absolutely no chance of escape that way. Hal had leaped to his feet at the first alarm, but he did not move. He stood glaring about him like a tiger at bay.

To be captured alive was not in his thoughts; better to kill the girl and himself, he muttered.

Meanwhile the guerillas marched boldly in. They were evidently excited about something, talking very loud and cursing somewhat. Of course coming from the light they could see nothing in the deep night of the cave; they did not see Hal.

But Hal knew it was only a question of seconds. He gripped his revolver savagely, and crouched, waiting.

It was at that desperate moment that he heard a voice behind him. It made him leap as if he had been shot.

"The well! The well!"

It was the girl whispering to him hoarsely.

"The well!"

Hal glanced at it. And as was his habit, he made up his mind in one instant and acted in the next.

Crouching low in the shadows, he glided down the cave until he came to the deep black hole. It was a terrible prospect, but a second's hesitation might mean death.

Hal seized the bucket and swung loose.

It seemed then as if all the world were flashing past him.

Never in his life did Hal have a more terrific experience. The well must have been fifty feet deep, and Hal went down like a shot.

The clatter of the windlass above was deafening, but Hal hardly heard it. For in a moment more he had struck the water and was plunging through it.

He thought that he would never stop; and when he stopped he thought that he would never rise. He struggled upward with all his might. He choked and gasped; his head rang; and he must have been almost blue in the face when finally he reached the surface.

There he found new excitement. Naturally enough the amazing behavior of that bucket had alarmed the Spaniards. To a man they were gazing over the edge.

"Por dios!" Hal heard one of them shout. "It must have been the devil!"

One of them lit some kind of a torch to light the place. But Hal found a fissure in which he could hide under the wall of the well, and so he was quite satisfied to let the search go on.

Many indeed and original were the theories the puzzled Spaniards offered. They guessed everything except the truth. They must needs haul up the bucket to see if it was all right; and then seeing that it was, they let it fall to see if it would go down as fast.

Being full of water, it did, and that seemed to satisfy all. Hal breathed freely as he heard them turn away and resume the discussion of what had interested them.

Hal could hear everything, and he soon learned most interesting news indeed.

Briefly it was as follows. General Velasquez had been interviewed by a messenger from the kidnapers. It had

THE KNIFE AIMED FOR CLIF'S HEART FOUND ANOTHER MARK.

ended in the stern old officer's throwing the man into prison and ordering his execution for treason.

It was small wonder that the men were infuriated. Their oaths were terrible. And Hal shuddered as he heard the fate that was reserved for the general's beautiful daughter.

It was a comfort to the brave young officer to know that he still had his revolver, and that his bath had not hurt it. He could climb that rope at any time he chose.

And then, too, he thought of Juan, who would certainly bring help in the end. It was a vague hope, but Hal comforted himself a trifle with it.

That hope, however, he was destined to be deprived of in a most unexpected way. There was a sudden burst of excitement above and the American suddenly heard a voice, that of his former acquaintance, the major, shouting:

"Por dios! he's got one of the Yankees!"

"How did you catch him?" roared another voice above the excited hum of conversation.

Hal knew only too well what that meant. Juan, helpless and unarmed, had been found and made prisoner!

It was only one more reason for being brave and resolute. Hal gritted his teeth and clinched his fists in a way that boded ill for the guerillas.

He had no definite plans, but he was ready for anything. And he had his wits about him and was watching everything.

He soon had occasion to be glad of his vigilance. A wildly desperate plan flashed over him, one that made him almost shout in triumph.

It was only a hope, a chance. But it might be successful. And in the brief second or two that he had to decide he made up his mind to try it.

The whole thing was suggested to him by hearing two men who were standing by the mouth of the well and talking.

"I want a drink," one of them chanced to say.

And he began turning the windlass to haul up the bucket. It was then that the plan occurred to Hal, and was adopted and carried out in the same instant.

Hal snatched from his pocket the vial the girl had given him and emptied its contents into the bucket of water as it went up.

"Now," he muttered, "we'll see!"

His suspense may be imagined. The man might taste the water and then pour the whole thing out on the ground. But then on the other hand he might drink, and all the rest might drink, and for all Hal knew every man of them might fall dead.

His trick may not seem a very fair one, for poisoning is a cowardly way of fighting. But Hal was no coward, as we know. He felt justified in taking any advantage of these bloodthirsty outlaws in order to save the girl from their clutches.

And so he waited in the intensest anxiety to learn what would be the effect of his trick.

He heard the man take a drink from the bucket; straining his ears, he thought he could make out that his companion did likewise. Then suddenly to Hal's intense delight, he heard the first man call out:

"Here's some water, if anybody wants some."

"From the haunted well," laughed a voice. "Give me some of it."

After that Hal had no means of telling how many of the men drank. He listened intently, but all he could catch was an occasional remark.

But he knew that no one had tasted

TWICE IN THREE DAYS A MYSTERIOUS HAND SOUGHT CLIF'S LIFE.

anything wrong in the water, and that no suspicions had been awakened.

"Perhaps there's too much water," Hal thought. "It may not effect them in the least."

That only time could show. And the young lieutenant waited anxiously, never once ceasing to strain his ears to learn what was going on.

This last mentioned fact was a most fortunate one. Perhaps five minutes passed by and then suddenly Hal's ear caught some terrible words, words that struck him like a thunderbolt.

It was the chief of the band who spoke; what he said was this:

"Give some water to the girl."

The lieutenant shuddered in horror as he comprehended. He turned pale and sank back with a groan as he realized how helpless he was. There was no rope for him to climb, nothing for him to do!

Yes, there was one thing. A terrible thing, but it had to be done. Only a coward would have hesitated. That girl must not be allowed to taste of the poison.

Instantly Hal drew a deep breath and a moment later his voice rang out:

"Rita Velasquez!" he yelled. "Don't drink that water!"

CHAPTER VII.

A SWIM FOR LIFE.

The effect of Hal's shout was naturally to strike the Spaniards dumb with amazement. There was a dead silence in the cave, lasting perhaps half a minute.

It was succeeded by a perfect babel of sounds; everybody seemed to begin yelling at once.

Above it all Hal recognized the voice of the major.

"Por dios! it's that Yankee!"

"So they know me," thought Hal,

grimly. "Perhaps that'll make them shy of attacking me."

He had examined his revolver (which it will be remembered he had captured from one of the Spaniards) and found that he had only three cartridges left. But he resolved that should mean three men, provided Spanish cartridges were only made as water-tight as American ones.

Very likely the first attempt of the enraged men would be throwing heavy objects down at him; so Hal groped about him anxiously, and succeeded in finding a way of protecting himself.

We have spoken of a niche in the wall of the well. The lieutenant made the startling discovery that beyond this there was a long underground passageway, filled with water, and with enough air above to enable him to swim along.

It was intensely dark, and of course Hal did not know how far the passage went. But he swam under a short ways to hide.

"This will be a place to make a fight," he mused, as he lay still and waited.

The excitement above had meanwhile increased with every moment. Apparently the whole guerilla band had rushed to the edge of the well and were peering down; a moment later came a great splash, and Hal knew that they had dropped a box of ammunition or something down in order to hit him.

The shouts and furious oaths continued meanwhile. Everybody was yelling at once, and a thousand plans were suggested. Boxes and huge rocks fairly rained down into the well.

Hal was listening, above all this confusion, for one sound he hoped to catch. Perhaps a minute after he had given his warning he heard one of the men shout out:

THE CRIMINALS FOUND CLIF IN THE WAY. HE WAS FEARED AS A WITNESS.

"Santa Maria! that fiend must have put poison in the water!"

"So you begin to feel it," muttered Hal, grimly. "That is more promising. I expect a crisis now."

It was well that he was prepared, for a crisis came for a fact. That terrible cry frightened the Spaniards into silence for a moment. When the sounds broke out again they were yells of fury and vengeance.

And then Hal heard the creaking sound of the windlass turning. He steadied himself by the side of the wall and drew out his revolver. For he knew that the sound meant that some one was coming down.

There was a light, too, and the walls were gradually illuminated. Hal could see where he was and he clutched the stones and waited.

It was a wild and terrible spot for a battle, but Hal's courage rose to the occasion. His eyes gleamed with resolution, and he waited eagerly until the moment for action should come.

It was a strange sight that finally came into view. Down the black, slimy well the bucket slowly descended into view. Seated upon it was one of the savage guerillas, hugging the rope in his arms and clutching in one hand a torch and in the other a revolver.

He glared about him as he came down. But the light must have blinded him, for he did not see Hal staring at him. He reached the water, and then he yelled for the bucket to stop.

"Come on now!" he shouted, making the walls of the black hole echo and ring.

That was evidently meant for the others. There was a grating sound as of somebody sliding down the rope. A moment later a second man came into view, and stopped just above the other's head.

"Do you see him?" he whispered, hoarsely. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," the other answered. "Here comes Jose."

Another man began to slide down. Hal concluded that it was time to act, and, without a second's hesitation, he raised his revolver and fired. Cartridges being scarce, Hal first took the man who did not have the torch.

The bullet struck the ruffian in the head, and he tumbled into the water without so much as a groan.

The other gave a yell of rage and terror; he raised his revolver and took a chance shot at where he had seen the flash of Hal's weapon. He missed, and that was his only chance. Hal fired, and the fellow pitched forward into the water, torch and all. Black darkness settled down upon the spot.

There came a dead silence, too, after the cracking echoes of the shots had died out. The men in the cave above must have been horror-struck by what they heard, for they made not a sound for several moments.

And so there was only the lapping of the water disturbed by the fall of the two ill-fated men.

Hal waited for a minute or two, and then, hearing no one else coming, he turned and began swimming back into the passage.

For he had only one more shot left. Another effort like the last must overcome him. And he knew that the Spaniards were desperate enough to attempt it.

And so he chose flight; he thought that he would see how far that underground passage ran.

There were some very startling discoveries before Hal. He had supposed that the place in which he had hidden was only a little fissure caused by the caving in of the earth. But as he swam the wall

above his head got higher, and the passage got broader.

And before he had gone much farther the startling truth dawned upon him that he had struck one of Nature's most wonderful freaks, an underground stream!

For he began to feel a current distinctly. It was hurrying him on farther and farther from the well every moment.

If Hal had known more about such things he would have been for more nervous, for there are likely to be waterfalls and rapids in underground streams as in any other. But he swam on boldly, groping about him in the darkness and so engrossed in the strange voyage he was making that the guerillas and their cave and everything connected with it seemed forgotten.

Hal's wonder increased at every stroke he took. He was sensible that the stream was hurrying him on with great rapidity, and still there was no sign of an end to the journey.

On and on Hal swept; he tried to calculate the distance; it seemed to him fully a mile. He did not try to stop, for another hope had occurred to him.

This passage must lead to daylight some time. And if he could get out, he could bring help and put an end to the guerillas' triumph in short order.

And so he was anxiously looking ahead for light as he glided on with the current.

Several times he had rather unpleasant frights, for the roof above him got so low that his head was forced under water. Each time, however, the current swept him out into the air again—but still all in the densest darkness conceivable.

The end was slow in coming, but it came at last. Hal found himself suddenly swept into a broad pool of water. The current had ceased. But what was a thousand times more important to him, there was light at last!

Hal gave a cry of joy; but it changed into one of amazement. There was light to be seen, and plainly, so much is fact that he could dimly make out the walls of the cavern in which he was swimming.

But where did it come from? There was not a sign of a fissure or an opening into daylight. A startling truth was forced upon Hal.

The light came from under the water!

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CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE RESCUE.

That was certainly an uncanny discovery, and for a while the puzzled officer wished himself somewhere else. There was no supposition by which he could begin to account for the phenomenon.

It was only when he swam toward the place where the light came that the truth dawned upon him.

This strange underground stream apparently flowed into some lake or pond out in the open air; but it flowed through a passage that was sunken under water. Hal could see the light, but his progress was barred completely.

Any one can understand how balked and angry Hal felt. The passage was scarcely a foot below the water, and Hal could plunge down and see the light streaming in. But when he rose into the air again he had a wall of rock before him.

There were few people more nervy than Hal, and when he once made up his mind that some danger had to be risked, he usually wasted no time in hesitation.

And so he fretted and fumed against that wall but a minute or so before he made up his mind to a desperate necessity. He was going either to get out through there or perish in the attempt.

"All I've got to do is to swim under water," he muttered.

The thought was enough to take his breath away; but Hal needed all his. He took off his coat, and gathered all his energies together. He filled his lungs with air, and then turned and plunged down.

Any one who has ever taken a long swim under water knows what a killing operation it is when kept up too long. Hal's very life depended upon his keeping it up. He drove his way through the water with all his might, on and on, until it seemed as if his head would burst if he stayed below any longer.

He kept his eyes open, and he could see the light ahead—nearer and nearer, yet so far!

With what relief he ended the terrible effort cannot be told. When he saw that he was clear of the terrible chasm, when he shot up and out beneath the clear blue sky, he felt as if he had come out of the gates of hades.

He was so dazed that at first he could scarcely see. It was not that the swim had been so terribly long, but that the suspense and uncertainty had been so great.

Hal found himself close to the bank of a little lake, a wild, tangled place that looked as if it had never been visited by man. Behind him was a tall cliff, the wall of rock under which he had swam.

It was perhaps fifty feet high, and from the outside there was only a slight shelving in of the rock to indicate where the strange passageway was.

After resting for a moment Hal swam to the shore, to one side of the ledge of rocks. He sat there for a short while debating what he should do next.

He thought of riding back for help. But that was an ignominious way of ending the adventure, and Hal wanted something more exciting.

He saw no prospect of anything ex-

citing just then; but as it actually transpired, he was in a position to see what was perhaps the most thrilling event of the whole day.

The silence of the jungle was suddenly broken by a scream; it brought Hal to his feet with a leap, for he knew that it was a woman's voice.

He was on the point of dashing up the bank to find out what was the matter; but before he had time to go to the trouble the trouble came to him.

The cry was followed by excited shouts, and a second later by another scream.

"Help! Help!"

It came from the high bank or cliff of which we have spoken. Hal gazed up; and at the same instant the reason for the disturbance became evident.

A woman's figure clad in white burst through the thicket. Hal gave a gasp as he saw who it was.

"Rita Velasquez!"

Yes, it was the beautiful Spaniard. She was running for her very life; and not ten feet behind her was one of the guerillas.

The girl saw the lake and the cliff in front of her. But she did not swerve.

The Spaniard saw it, too, and called to her. He redoubled his efforts to overtake her.

There was a moment of most intense suspense. The lieutenant's heart seemed fairly to stop still.

It was a terrible moment, but the man won; the girl was in the very act of flinging herself over the ledge when he gripped her by the arm.

The girl screamed and turned upon him like a tigress. The two swayed on the very edge of the cliff.

Certainly they would have fallen both together had it not been for the fact that at that very moment two more of the

FOUR OTHERS FAILED. WAS CLIF TO MEET DEATH IN THE TRENCHES, TOO?

guerillas came into view. They gave a shout of triumph and rushed to aid their comrade in overpowering his victim.

Rita Velasquez saw them, and redoubled her frenzied efforts. But it was a hopeless struggle. The man was a powerful fellow, and she could not shake him off.

But help was nearer than she supposed. Hal had been watching, and his brain was busy.

He got out his revolver; he had but one shot left, but surely he would not have a better chance to use it than this.

The risk he had to take was a terrible one, but his hand did not tremble. He might kill the girl; but he knew she would prefer that to being recaptured.

And so he took quick aim and fired.

Where he hit Hal never knew; but the Spaniard must have known, for he staggered back with a yell of pain.

He released the girl; and that was all that was necessary. She turned, and with a single bound reached the edge of the cliff.

She did not hesitate an instant. Hal gasped for breath as he saw her leap out and shoot down toward the water.

It was a horrible sight. She struck upon her back and sank almost instantly. Hal, forgetting the Spaniards completely, plunged into the water and struck out for the spot.

There was only one thing that kept him from being seen by them. The side of the cliff was bulging, and Hal had darted in close to the foot of it. The girl's pursuers rushed to the edge, but they could not get far enough out to see either him or her.

They dashed back into the bushes so as to go around and get to the lakeside. They failed to see Hal in the meanwhile.

But he had not a thought of them or of his danger; he reached the spot where

Rita Velasquez had fallen and he was just in time to catch the body as it rose.

Whether the girl were dead or not Hal had no means of knowing; certainly she was unconscious at any rate. Hal gazed at her white face in dismay.

He dragged the body in toward the foot of the cliff, where he could catch hold of the bushes and rest.

It was there that he was when the three guerillas (for he had only wounded the one) came into view again from the thicket. Hal caught sight of them at the same instant that they espied him.

Hal gave a start of horror, realizing the helplessness of his position. The three men yelled in triumph.

After their mutual recognition the end of the whole matter came in one second more. The Spaniard Hal had wounded raised his revolver and fired a shot. When he saw the effect of it he gave a howl of delight.

Hal Maynard had sunk beneath the surface of the water. The girl disappeared, too. And though for five minutes the three men stood anxiously watching, not a sign more of them was seen.

"I guess that Yankee is settled," muttered the three.

CHAPTER IX.

A DESPERATE STRUGGLE.

As a matter of fact, Hal Maynard was not dead. He had not even been touched by the bullet. He had merely exchanged the perils of the open lake for ones which seemed perhaps a little less terrible.

He was going to try the underground passage once more!

He had gathered his breath and seized the unconscious Miss Velasquez by the hair. And then he had sunk and began a swim.

If he had found it difficult to make the

To Touch a Dead Body Unexpectedly, What an Uncanny Feeling!

trip by himself he found it a thousand times more so now that he had to drag the girl with him. It was the most frightful experience of Hal's life; and we shall pass over it quickly.

He had no difficulty in finding the passage; but the struggle to reach the air within almost cost him his life.

He dragged the girl with him until he was choked almost to unconsciousness, and scarcely able to move. Then he rose—but not to the surface.

Judge of his unutterable horror. His head struck the rock above! He opened his mouth to breathe, and he found only the choking water.

Hal was almost paralyzed; he was so dazed that he scarcely knew where he was. In another half minute he would have been unconscious forever. But he released his hold of the girl's body and made one last despairing effort. He kicked once or twice more, his head scraping on the rock above. And just as he had all but fainted he shot up into the air.

Hal was so exhausted that for fully a minute he could only lie still and gasp. But his consciousness came back to him, and with it a terrible conviction.

He had to dive under there once more!

Yes, he had left that girl to die; and Hal felt that he had better have died himself.

He might have had a terrible temptation to fight with if he had had taken time enough to think. But there had been but one idea in Hal's mind—to save that girl. And that idea swayed him now.

He knew that he had not far to go. He gathered his breath as best he could, and though still dazed, dived under once more.

He had to take but three strokes to reach her, but those three almost exhausted him. He turned to struggle back

once more, and again came that frightful, agonizing struggle.

If any experience of Hal's lifetime were worse than that first effort it was this second one. When Hal finally reached the air again he was utterly helpless.

Fortunately the rocky wall was rough, and he could cling to it. How long he stayed there he had not the least idea, for he was hardly conscious at first.

But all the time he had the reviving thought that he was safe, and the girl, too. The guerillas thought them dead, and so there was no more danger.

The only thing to worry about now was poor Juan, who, for all Hal knew, was still lying a prisoner in the cave.

It was only the thought of Juan that finally induced Hal to move at all. He could have clung where he was for hours.

During all this time the girl had been lying unconscious in Hal's arms. He feared that she was dead, for all his efforts to revive her at first proved in vain.

But the agony of having to give up that hope was spared the brave lieutenant. Perhaps half an hour after he had gotten her into the cave she opened her eyes and groaned feebly.

Hal's relief was inexpressible. He felt then that at least all his labor had not been in vain.

It was some time before the poor girl was able to speak. It appeared that she had not been badly injured by her fall, merely stunned. She could scarcely believe her ears when she understood how she had been saved.

There were one or two things Hal was anxious to know—first and foremost about Juan. The last the girl had seen of him, she said, was lying on the floor of the cave, tied hand and foot.

"I feared those fiends would kill him,"

A GAPING HOLE IN THE MAN'S HEAD TOLD WHAT HAD CUT THE CORD OF LIFE.

Hal muttered. "But tell me, how did you escape from them?"

"There weren't but half a dozen of them left," said the girl. "And three of them went down into the well after you shot the first one. The other three were the ones that chased me."

"But where were the rest of them?" cried Hal, not a little puzzled.

"You have forgotten the poison?"

Hal had indeed forgotten that, and he gave a start of horror.

"You don't mean it killed all of them!"

"No," said the girl, calmly. "Not all. But it made the rest so frightfully ill that I guess they are dead now."

She went on to describe to Hal a scene so horrible that it made his blood run cold. Fully a dozen of the guerillas had drunk of the bucket of water, and the last she had seen of them they were rolling about the cave in agony, shrieking and cursing.

The rest had been endeavoring to find Hal when Rita Velasquez had resolved upon a dash for liberty, the result of which we have seen. She had supposed herself safe, but the guerillas had tracked her through the thicket.

It was a stirring tale indeed; and it nerved Hal to action once more. He knew that the search for him must have been abandoned. Accordingly he might make his way back to the well, and as the guerillas were now so few and so demoralized, there would be an excellent chance of rescuing poor Juan from their clutches.

He feared that he would have a hard time helping his companion back against the current of the stream. But it had to be done if they ever expected to get out.

It did not prove such a very difficult task when it came to be tried, however.

For they drew themselves along by

grasping the rough sides of the rocky wall.

Had the current been all they had to contend against they would have had no very unpleasant time. But as it actually turned out, a more gruesome trip than this one proved it would not have been possible to conceive.

It must be remembered that they were in absolute blackness; they could not see any more than if they had been blindfolded. And suddenly Rita Velasquez, putting out her hand, touched something that caused her to shrink back with a scream of horror.

"What in the world is it?" Hal cried.

"It's—it's—oh, merciful Heavens, it's a dead man!"

Hal found upon investigation that it was indeed a corpse, drifting down with the current.

"It's one of those I killed," he said. "Come on."

On they went. Not ten yards farther did they get, however, before Hal was startled by placing his hand squarely upon what seemed a human face.

A moment later a second dead body brushed past them.

The girl was trembling so that she could scarcely move; and her escort, while he knew there was no cause of fear, could not but feel uncomfortable in the midst of such ghastly surroundings.

"But I only killed two," he said. "So that is the end of it."

With that assurance they went on for a minute more. And then, to their consternation, they met with a third of those gruesome inhabitants of the cavern.

They tried not to think what that might mean. They rushed on as fast as they could. But again before a minute passed came another drifting body, and not ten feet behind it a fifth.

There was only one possible explana-

A Fearful Cry of Distress Held Clif in the Perilous Trenches.

tion of that condition of affairs. The guerillas had thrown those who had died into the water.

"A strange thing for them to do," Hal muttered. "But that's the only explanation. Come on."

The poor girl was growing more nervous every moment. But the terrors she had so far undergone in the passage were nothing compared to what was before her.

They had just succeeded in getting past a particularly swift part of the current and had halted to rest. Hal put out his hand and found that he touched another body.

It was a coat sleeve he chanced to feel; an instant later every drop of blood in his body seemed to congeal. He felt a cold hand grip him convulsively by the wrist!

And the next instant came a horrible groan, ending in a choking gurgle!

CHAPTER X.

WHAT JUAN DID.

The two were simply paralyzed by that. Hal had heard of drowning men who drag others down with them, and he strove with all his might to loosen the grip of this man.

But he could not. In the struggle he found himself gliding down the stream away from the terrified girl.

Hal grew desperate as he found all his strength unavailing. He whipped out his sword, and aimed a slashing cut at the arm that gripped him.

That saved him; the drowning man, with another horrible gurgling noise

drifted on down stream, and Hal turned and struggled back to Rita Velasquez's side.

Hal felt that a few more incidents like that would unnerve him completely. But he had need to brace his nerves.

For to put it briefly, no less than nine successive bodies were passed in the course of that swim. The latter ones were all alive, writhing and struggling and filling the slimy black passage with the most terrible sounds that ever issued from human throats.

One of the last of these ghastly voyagers fastened his grip upon the girl. She fainted dead away from fright.

The struggling man almost drowned her. Hal was compelled to use his sword again, and this time to hack away unmercifully before he could cut the man loose.

It was fortunate that they were then near the well, otherwise they must certainly have given up in despair.

Hal could tell when they neared it by the faint glimmer of light. He struggled on until he was almost out under the opening again. There he stopped to rest and map out a plan of action.

He could make out in the gloom that the fatal bucket was down; so he knew that in any case it would be possible for him to climb up.

But he concluded not to try it at once; and it was well that he did not. He had not been there a minute, and had barely succeeded in calming his terrified companion, when suddenly right in front of them fell a heavy body with a shriek and then a splash.

What a Pitiful Death, That of the Boy Volunteer of the Forlorn Hope.

That was perhaps the most terrible experience of all. It was another of the dying Spaniards. He kicked and writhed and struggled in a most frightful way.

But the two saw him this time, and kept out of his way as he drifted past. Down the long black passage he glided, his groans and struggles growing weaker every moment.

That Hal was amazed by that extraordinary state of affairs there is no need to say. That the Spaniards should fling their sick companions into the well was an almost incredible piece of barbarism.

And yet there was no other supposition possible. At any rate none occurred to Hal.

The horrible thought flashed over him that perhaps one of those he had passed in the darkness was his comrade. If the guerillas served one another that way, would they be apt to have much mercy upon an enemy?

The mere thought that perhaps it was Juan whom he had been slashing with his sword made Hal shudder all over. But there was no way for him to tell.

He could only wait and hope and dread. He did that for at least half an hour, growing more impatient every moment.

Yet he knew that to climb that rope would be to take terrible risks. No more bodies were flung in, but still it was quite certain that some one was in the cave. And climbing the rope would be a noisy operation.

Probably Hal would have remained where he was for a much longer time if it had not been for an unexpected incident.

He was suddenly startled to hear the stillness up above broken by a shot.

He muttered an exclamation of astonishment. Listening, he heard two more shots in quick succession, besides shouts and cries.

Hal wasted not a moment in hesitation. The noise meant that some kind of a fight was going on. And it takes two to make a fight; some friends must be near!

From the bottom of the well he could not tell very much of what was going on, but it sounded to him as if some one were attacking the cave. It might be Americans, or it might be General Velasquez and his men come to the rescue of his daughter.

In either case Hal was not the man to lie quiet. He must help even the Spanish in a case like this.

And though he had no weapon except his sword, he swam to the rope and began boldly to climb. If there was a fight no one would notice his ascent; and when he got to the top he could tell what to do.

The first firing was followed by a dead silence. During it Hal was climbing for his very life, dragging himself up the slimy rope foot by foot.

That he gazed upward anxiously there is no denying. For all he knew, at any moment a pistol shot might send him down that gruesome passageway of the dead.

But that accident did not happen. On the contrary, Hal reached the edge of the well unnoticed.

He raised himself up cautiously; he darted a swift glance about him.

He held his breath at that critical moment. His whole being seemed waiting in intense suspense. For so much depended upon what he saw—not only his own fate, but Juan's and Miss Velasquez's.

It may be said at once that he did not see what he expected to see. In fact, he saw nothing at all.

He stared about the place. It seemed absolutely deserted. There was not a man in sight, either dead or alive.

The lieutenant was not a little puzzled by that strange state of affairs. The shots had certainly been fired within the cave; but who had fired them? And where was Juan?

Hal remained clinging to the edge listening. He could see the entrance from where he was. And before half a minute had passed he saw a figure dart across it.

Who it was Hal was not quick enough to notice. But some one else was quicker. There was a shot at the instant the figure appeared. It was a true shot, too, for the man gave a cry.

But what was startling about that shot to the American was that it was fired almost beside him. It took him so completely by surprise that he almost fell backward into the well.

He stared in consternation. And then for the first time he made out a figure lying on the floor of the cave.

The person, whoever he was, was almost hidden in the shadow; and he had built himself a barricade of boxes, from behind which he was firing.

Evidently he was the sole defender of the cavern. A sudden wild thought flashed over Hal.

He leaned forward, staring, straining his eyes to see. A moment later he leaped out of the well with a wild cry of delight.

"Juan! Juan! Is it you?"

And the dark figure bounded to his feet and flung himself into the other's arms.

Yes! Juan Ramirez was the captor of the guerillas' cave!

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTURED BY THE ENEMY.

There was one thing to be attended to first of all. Poor Rita Velasquez was waiting in an agony of suspense below.

Hal called to her with the result that a few moments later she was clinging to the bucket and being rapidly lifted out of her unpleasant position. Hal escorted her to a protected corner of the cave, and then he was ready to join Juan in whatever work might be necessary.

The moment the first shock of surprise had passed Juan had calmly resumed his position behind the barricade. What was to be done there was evident enough. And so Hal picked up two revolvers from the many which lay in a pile near his friend, and then flung himself down beside him to watch.

"Now," he whispered, "tell me all about this."

"There's nothing much to tell," Juan answered, "and we mustn't do much talking, for I'm looking for another rush from those devils outside."

"How many are there?"

"There were only about six, and I've

"Goodby, Faraday," Said the Dying Hero. "I Never Flinched."

killed two. But I think some others must have just arrived from somewhere, for I saw about a dozen of them."

Hal got his revolvers ready and laughed grimly. Hidden in the darkness as they were, the two had very little to fear from numbers.

"I'll do my share," Hal said.

There was a silence of perhaps a minute or two. Then as nothing happened the conversation was resumed; for the lieutenant was anxious to hear his comrade's story.

It was soon told.

Most of the guerillas had been ill; the rest were either hunting for Hal or pursuing Miss Velasquez; in the meantime Juan, as he said, had freed his hands by tearing the rope on the rough wall.

He had taken possession of the cave, shot those who were in the well, and flung the whole crowd into the water.

"Merciful Heavens!" exclaimed Hal, just there. "If you had only known the fright you were giving us!"

"I thought you were killed," was Juan's response. "And besides you aren't a baby, to be afraid of dead men. Look there! did you see that fellow run by the door?"

"He can't do any harm out there," said Hal. "And we'll hold the fort, I guess."

"I've fixed it so they can't take us alive," said Juan, grimly. "Look!"

He pointed to the stores of ammunition.

"There are some big shells there," he said. "And I put a fuse in one. We can
It is Easy to Say Die Like a Man.

blow up the cave if we get the worst of the fight."

"We won't——" Hal began.

But he went no further. As if seeming to know that the two had finished their mutual explanations and were ready for business, the guerillas began their attack.

The struggle, which was destined to be a wild one, began without a second's warning; and it was all over in a very few minutes indeed.

The Spaniards, shouting with rage and eagerness, made a simultaneous rush at the entrance. The very instant that they came in sight the two defenders opened fire together.

They were dead shots both of them, and they made every bullet tell. A fairer target could not have been asked.

But the guerillas were desperate with rage, and they had prepared for a hot resistance.

They poured into the cave, yelling and firing in the direction of the barricade.

It was but a second or two before the cave seemed full of them. And then indeed the position of Hal and Juan was a desperate one.

They were under a perfect fusilade of bullets. But not once did they flinch; for they were ready to die if necessary, and only wished to make their death costly.

The only thing that saved them from being struck at the very first was the fact that they were lying still, their eyes accustomed to the darkness, while their enemies had come in from the light and could not see clearly.

But they could see where the flashes
What Were Cliff's Thoughts Then?

from the revolvers came from. And toward that spot they dashed in a body.

It was a desperate charge, and a desperate struggle followed it. The cave was filled with smoke, and the din of the firing and the shouts was incessant. One would have thought that a whole regiment was engaged.

The end of the struggle could have been but one thing—the complete overwhelming of the two gallant defenders. But it seemed as if the fates themselves intervened to save them.

At the very moment that the guerillas were nearest to victory, and were charging the fiercest, they suddenly stopped and listened, and then turned to run. For above all the noise had run a wild chorus of cheers, and a voice shouting in Spanish:

“In, boys, and at ’em!”

The sound turned the tide of battle in one instant. The terrified guerillas scattered this way and that before the charge of a company of Spanish infantry. Above all the confusion Hal heard the cry:

“Father!”

And he knew that it was General Velasquez who had arrived.

He knew, too, that he and Juan were prisoners like the rest. He had only a second or two to think, for the battle was over in that time.

Hal realized that all these stores of ammunition were falling into the hands of the enemy.

The brave young officers’ action was prompt as the occasion demanded. He leaped to his feet and back into the rear of the cave.

A moment more and he gave a cry that scattered confusion about the place.

“Run! The powder is on fire!”

And so it was; for he himself had lit the fuse!

There was a rush for the entrance. The last man had hardly gotten outside before there was a roar and a crash that was simply deafening. A great puff of smoke and dust came from the door of the cavern, and the whole cliffside seemed to heave and shake.

And when the shock passed the guerillas’ cave was no longer in existence. It was buried, and they with it, in a heap of debris. Hal and Juan were the only prisoners captured.

About sunset on the day during which the above incidents took place the outpost pickets of General Lawton’s division were hailed by a party of Spanish officers under a flag of truce. They were admitted to the camp, and they escorted in with them the two young officers whose adventures we have been following.

It was General Lawton himself who received the flag and the message, which was to this effect:

“That General Bernabi Velasquez desires to send two American officers back to their camp under a guard of honor, with congratulations to their commander upon possessing the services of the two bravest gentlemen he had ever known.”

And with that the dignified Spaniards took their leave. They left the general staring in no little amazement at the two.

Hal was of course compelled to tell the story, which he did as modestly as he

What a Strange Conveyance, and What a Desperate Ride for Cliff.

could. The general shook hands with them, almost with tears in his eyes.

And then he stepped to a chest in his tent.

"The reward comes most opportunely," he said. "Here is a telegram from Washington."

He put it into Hal's hand, and Hal read it, his eyes wide open with amazement.

"Lieutenant Maynard," it read, "has been appointed upon General Merritt's staff, and will report at San Francisco immediately."

And Hal staggered back against the tent pole and fairly gasped for breath.

"General Merritt! And going to the Philippines!"

"Yes," said the general. "General Merritt has heard of your bravery and asked for your services. You may start on the Porter which is going to leave for Key West to-night."

And Hal and Juan when they were once out of that tent rushed into each other's arms and fairly yelled for joy.

"Going to the Philippines!"

[THE END.]

The next issue of Starry Flag will contain "The Hero of Manila; or, Hal Maynard Under a New Commander," by Douglas Wells. Look out for No. 18 which will be issued December 1st.



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